

FOREWORD

Hema Swaminathan

Across countries, men continue to hold the majority of leadership positions and economic power. Around the world, only a quarter of parliamentarians¹ and less than a third of senior managers² are women. Women hold just 32 percent of private wealth globally,³ and sizeable wage gaps persist in nearly every country. While much progress has been made in alleviating gender inequality, we still have critical challenges to overcome.

More often than not, governments are complicit in maintaining gender inequality. We largely assume that governments no longer openly discriminate against women, at least not in certain geographies of the world. Focusing on economic structure and the labor market, this book systematically shatters that myth by arraying together a wide range of evidence, including primary data analysis, literature review, case law research, and interviews with diverse stakeholders. The study is painstakingly thorough and presented to the readers in lucid prose. The authors persuasively argue that explicit discrimination by the state has by no means ceased to exist, even as it has lessened. Further, professedly gender-neutral policies are also regressive if they contribute to stereotyping women's and men's work. The modern workplace continues to be stifled by restrictive gender norms. While much has improved, true gender equality remains elusive.

Gender inequality is pervasive in the economic and social domains. These inequalities reinforce each other, leading to a vicious cycle of disempowerment and inequality. Economic empowerment is foundational to empowerment in all spheres of life. Economic dependence for women has material and nonmaterial implications. Compared to men, women are more likely to be in poverty and less likely to own property and other assets, which leads to lower wealth.

The labor market is a gendered institution in which laws and social mores interact to produce structural inequalities with immense reach. The patriarchal perspective underpins several essential functions of the labor market. First, the valuation and, by extension, the undervaluation of specific skills, activities, and jobs—and in particular, the devaluation of care and “women’s work.” According to the International Labour Organization, women’s unpaid caregiving contributes around \$8 trillion in value to the global economy each year; meanwhile, paid care work is often marked by low pay and poor working conditions.⁴ Second, how the labor market perceives men and women and how this perception translates into hiring, promotion, and other employment-related decisions. For example, studies show that presumptions about women’s care responsibilities undermine women’s paid work opportunities and advancement; at the same time, women who do move up in the workplace face backlash if they adopt stereotypically “male” leadership styles but are perceived as ineffective if they don’t. Finally, the instituted workplace policies reflect both government legislation and gendered roles.

Shifting our gaze from gender inequalities in the population to gender inequalities within the household, we see how discrimination in the labor market plays out within the intimacy of the home. Across countries, there exists gender inequality in economic resources within households. Our recent global survey of intrahousehold gender inequality analyzed couples’ labor market earnings in forty-five different countries across a four-decade period (1973–2016), using detailed microdata from 2.85 million households.⁵ We find that earnings inequality between couples is systemic and prevalent across disparate economies. Using more recent data, our research demonstrates that when both members of the couple are employed, there is not a single country where wives earn as much as their husbands.

Differences in labor market engagement between men and women help to drive the intracouple earnings inequality and are also reinforced by it. Women are less likely to participate in the labor market, and when they do, they work fewer hours in paid employment and are overrepresented in low-wage and low-skill jobs. The responsibilities of social reproduction borne by women inhibit their ability to exploit paid employment opportunities fully. Thus, on a global scale, trends suggest that even as couples are broadly converging on education, the same does not apply for occupations and earnings. It is not possible that all couples everywhere will have the same earnings or labor market trajectory. However, if women are consistently worse off financially, then we have a problem whose effects reverberate in both the economic and noneconomic spheres.

The government’s devaluation of care work plays out not only in the labor market (via discriminatory legislation and workplace policies) but also through laws that do not recognize women’s nonmonetary contribution to the household. Laws governing marital assets can be characterized as full community of property (all assets are considered joint property of couple), partial community of property (assets acquired postmarriage are joint, with those obtained before

marriage as separate), and separation of property (in which the property is independently owned with no concept of joint marital assets). Gender inequality in earnings limits women's purchasing ability to buy property. This is compounded by separation-of-property marital laws that do not recognize women's unpaid contribution to matrimonial assets via childcare and household maintenance. A recent study using data from forty-one developing countries shows that gender gaps in property ownership among couples is correlated with discriminatory laws related to property ownership, inheritance rules, marital regimes, and workplace discrimination.⁶

Inegalitarian distribution of economic resources can rob women of agency, voice, self-confidence, and self-esteem. These effects are most keenly manifest within the household. Strengthening women's access to economic resources improves their well-being and enhances bargaining power within the household, leading to a greater voice in decisions. Further, there are clear intergenerational benefits with higher investments in children's health and education.

Gender justice demands that both men and women have equal opportunities for full economic participation without legal or social discrimination. Equivalently, men also deserve a chance to lay down the burden of being a breadwinner and take on more household responsibilities, including fulfilling activities such as childcare and bonding with children. These are linked; women cannot take on additional responsibilities in employment if there is no redistribution of unpaid care work.

It is easy in our present times to despair. The world is still learning to cope with COVID-19 and its implications; climate change challenges are urgent; the winds of political change in many countries are blowing away liberal values, including hard-fought rights to equality, dignity, and freedom of expression. Amid all this, the authors are hopeful and optimistic in their narrative.

The book emphasizes the power of actions by macro- and microplayers, all of whom will benefit from greater gender equality in the economy and society. This is not a zero-sum game in which there are winners and losers. Instead, there are only winners and winners. Changing the patriarchal status quo is feasible only if we all step up and raise our voices. The authors say that we should hold our governments to account. But as I read the book, the clarion call to action and holding oneself accountable resonates in me. With every act of gender injustice we see and accept quietly, it is worth remembering that when the bell tolls, "it tolls for thee."

NOTES

1. World Bank. (2020). *Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)*. [Data set] <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS>.

2. Grant Thornton. (2021). *Women in business 2021*. www.grantthornton.global/en/insights/women-in-business-2021/.

3. Zakrzewski, A., Reeves, K. N., Kahlich, M., Klein, M., Mattar, A. R., & Knobel, S. (2020). *Managing the next decade of women's wealth*. Boston Consulting Group. www.bcg.com/publications/2020/managing-next-decade-women-wealth.
4. Addati, L., Cattaneo, U., Esquivel, V., & Valarino, I. (2018). *Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work*. International Labour Organization. www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/lang--en/index.htm.
5. Malghan, D., & Swaminathan, H. (2021). Global trends in intra-household gender inequality. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 189, 515–546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.07.022>.
6. Gaddis, I., Lahoti, R. S., & Swaminathan, H. (2020). *Women's legal rights and gender gaps in property ownership in developing countries (English)*. Policy Research working paper, no. WPS 9444. World Bank Group.

the world and life. We have been blessed in so many ways but none greater than to have dear friends and close family in our lives, looking for wolves in Wyoming, camping under atmospheric rivers in Alaska, stargazing under the desert night sky, paddling quiet rivers and exchanging poetry, hiking with dogs, finding groves of Giant Sequoia, sharing meals and life, moments over texts, emails, and calls.

CHANGE THE WORLD NEEDS

We are each profoundly grateful for all the people and supports that have enabled each of us to both work and care. But these opportunities should not rely on the good fortune of one's birthplace, one's friends or families. Every person, across all genders, should have the same chance to lead full lives.

Change is happening across countries and over time—yet much work remains. Steps forward within our collective lives provide examples. When Jody was born, gender discrimination at work was perfectly legal in the United States; major newspapers even published separate job lists for women and men. By the time Amy and Aleta were born, the United States had passed a law prohibiting gender discrimination in the economy—even if we have much farther to go on enforcement. Worldwide, 179 countries have now passed laws prohibiting gender discrimination at work, though fourteen countries still have no prohibition. When Jody gave birth to her sons, the United States did not even guarantee a single day of unpaid leave. That had changed by the time Aleta gave birth, and in Australia, where Amy gave birth, paid leave was introduced in 2011. Globally, since 1995, fourteen countries have introduced paid leave for mothers and at least sixty countries have introduced paid leave for fathers. This book is about the change that has taken place and what's left to do if we are to achieve gender equality for all in our lifetimes.